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THE TRAGIC CIRCLE OF FAMINE, GENOCIDE AND REFUGEES

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Introduction.

The attempt to understand the causes of genocide, the appearance of famines, and the generation of refugee flows has been seriously hampered by overspecialization. Each of these areas has given rise to a considerable body of literature that, however, rarely shows signs of familiarity with that of the others.

Genocides, including the Holocaust, have been written about very widely. Most scholars deal with only one genocide, such as that of the Armenians or the Jews. Recently, a small but growing group of scholars has treated several genocides in a comparative fashion (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990; Kuper, 1981). But neither group has paid enough attention to the deliberate use of hunger and starvation by the perpetrators. Nor has either group been much concerned with refugees although there have been escapes from all genocides.

Famines are an age-old phenomenon that has periodically savaged humanity. They have been studied and written about at great length. Most of the literature treats famines as the result of natural events, as was appropriate throughout much of history. It has only been since the middle of the twentieth century that the technology of storing, preserving and transporting food stuffs in large quantities over long distances has been developed. The availability of this technology has made it possible to deal

with natural disasters so efficiently that no further famines were to be expected. But famines do persist and continue to be blamed on natural events. Only a very small portion of the huge famine literature deals with so-called man-made famines (Sen, 1981). Authors using this term deal with cases of famine that were the unanticipated consequence of misguided policies. The Chinese government, for example, "....insisted that the peasants leave the land fallow in 1959 to avoid losses from not having enough storage facilities to handle the anticipated surplus" (MacFarquhar and Fairbank, 1987, p.318-319). Needless to add that the anticipated surplus never materialized, but that the land ordered to remain fallow contributed to the famine. Hardly anyone deals with the deliberate and intentional use of famine as a method of persecution or as a weapon in conflicts (William A. Dando, 1980; Jonassohn, 1992). This seems all the more surprising since hunger, starvation, and famine have been used in this manner throughout history. The reader needs only be reminded of the many cases where a city that could not be taken by storm was beleaguered until it ran short of food and water.

Refugees have become an increasingly serious problem because their number has been growing dramatically. As a result, international and humanitarian organizations find that the demands on their resources keep escalating. At the same time, they are examining and exploring a variety of policies that might help them to cope with the growing numbers of refugees. However, there has been little awareness, until quite recently, that refugees fleeing from famines are not fleeing from natural events, but are the victims of persecution and even genocide (Clay and Holcomb, 1986).

This paper attempts to explore two related issues. The first Issue

raises questions about the possible ways in which understanding and explanation would be affected if we were to study genocide, famine, and refugees not in isolation, but as different aspects of the same underlying process. The second issue explores the ways in which our understanding would be changed if we were to treat refugees as the carriers of early warnings of incipient catastrophes. These two questions are, of course, intimately related: if we were to accept the news carried by refugees as factual, and if we were to develop a more complex understanding of the genocidal process, then the international community would at least have the opportunity of intervening. Whether anyone will take advantage of this opportunity will probably depend more on political and economic considerations than on humanitarian concerns.

Definitions.

This paper is based entirely on secondary sources. Since these sources are often at odds about definitions, it is essential that confusion about such differences be avoided. The simplest definition is that dealing with starvation and famine which are quite generally defined as the absence of sufficient food and water to sustain life. But even this simple definition has become problematic. Kates and Millman (1990) have pointed out that

> ....for the first time in human history it is possible to contemplate the end of food scarcity, famine, and mass starvation. With the exception of its intentional creation or perpetration as a weapon of war or genocide, a combination of effective early-warning systems, national and global emergency food reserves, and improved experience with distribution and food-for-work programs has brought the end of famine well within sight. (p.404)

This raises the question of whether an up-to-date definition of famine and

starvation should not include a reference to the intent of the perpetrator?

The definitions of genocide and of refugee, however, illustrate the above-mentioned overspecialization. Both have been defined by the United Nations on separate occasions with quite conflicting results. The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide restricts the victims of genocide to members of "a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such" (Centre for Human Rights, 1988, p.143) The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees on the other hand, says that "the term 'refugee' shall apply to any person who .... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality ...." (Centre for Human Rights, 1988, pp.295-296).

These definitions of genocides and refugees are unsatisfactory for many reasons.that have given rise to much critical examination. When taken in context, two contradictions become apparent: the two definitions define different groups and the second one defines a geographical area, which the first one does not. The difficulty becomes clearer when we think of a group of refugees fleeing from genocide. They will be recognized as refugees only if they are outside the country of their nationality, and they will be recognized a victims of genocide only if they belong to one of the four specified types of groups. However, most observers agree that victims of genocide may belong to groups other than those mentioned, and that refugees may be found inside the country of their nationality.

Since it is not the intent of this paper to engage in a definitional debate, we shall treat as victims of genocide any group that a perpetrator

tries to eliminate, and as refugee any person fleeing from life threatening violence.

Food shortages as evidence of genocide.

The major activity of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and of most of the NGOs dealing with famines is the supplying of food, shelter and medical supplies to the victims. There is no question that these supplies are needed by the victims; but their need is often not the result of shortages, but rather the result of the deliberate withholding of available essentials. For instance, at the time of writing (fall 1992) the evidence has become quite clear that sufficient quantities of these essentials are in the pipeline, as the jargon goes, in Somalia. The problem is not shortage but distribution. Supplies go to those with the guns, not to those with the empty stomachs. In Bosnia the victims of 'ethnic cleansing' are starving while Serbia is exporting food to Russia in exchange for technology and weapons. This tragedy is reaching comic proportions when it is announced that warships will enforce the embargo against Serbia by patrolling the Adriatic coast while it is generally known that violations of the embargo are taking place primarily via the Danube.

It is not our purpose to review contemporary famines in detail. Yet, if we were to do so, it would become abundantly clear that most of them are the result of a planned campaign against a victim group and not the result of a natural catastrophe. In fact, this premeditated use of starvation has been a central part of many genocides. Its appeal to the perpetrators is manifold. It conserves food resources that may already be in short supply. It allows the perpetrators to hide their real motives behind an apparent natural disaster. Because it is a method that requires neither an advanced technology nor a highly developed bureaucracy it can be applied by even

the poorest country. It weakens the victims physically and lowers their resistance to epidemics, while at the same time it undermines their morale and their ability to resist. And eventually it kills.

The understanding of this use of starvation as a form of persecution should and can have wide-ranging consequences for action. It forcefully underlines that humanitarian supplies reach the victims only rarely. In the majority of cases such supplies enrich the perpetrators through their sale on the black markets and through their barter for additional arms and ammunition. The alternative would require the international community to find ways of establishing enforcement mechanisms for the various United Nations conventions that were meant to deal with such human rights violations.

The bottom line is that famines are evidence of genocide and not of food shortages. It is, of course, quite possible to perform a genocide without first imposing starvation on the victims; but such cases have become quite rare in the late twentieth century. If there is an advantage to the victims, it is in favour of starvation because of the slowness with which it escalates to famine. That extra time creates at least the possibility of resistance, of outside help arriving in time, or of escaping. It is the information carried by such early escapees that ought to alert the world to the need for action.

Refugees as sources of information.

The following remarks are meant to indicate how little we know about the onset of genocides and how difficult it is to obtain accurate information during moments of crisis. This particular quest for knowledge is not only inspired by scholarly curiosity, but rather by the desire to help the victims of persecution, and by the possibility - at least in theory - to

intervene in the evil designs of the perpetrators. However, either possibility requires a base of accurate information on which to develop appropriate policies and actions. But such accurate information is remarkably difficult to obtain by conventional means.

In cases of incipient genocides the usual channels of information are almost always blocked or distorted. The perpetrator country usually denies its role in annihilating a group as well as any intention of doing so. Visas to enter such countries are often impossible to obtain, access to the relevant areas is predictably blocked, or only brief, stage-managed visits are arranged to convince outside observers that nothing out of the ordinary is taking place. Information from the perpetrator governments, if available at all, is full of distorted facts and/or denials. Other obvious sources of information are foreign diplomats, journalists, Red Cross workers, and other representatives of humanitarian aid organizations, as well as academic specialists. Unfortunately, their evidence is also suspect because they are likely to omit or distort information that might get them evicted from the perpetrator country, or denied entry in the future. Finally, there are those emigrés and refugees who have managed to escape in time. Their testimony is almost always considered equally suspect because of their obvious personal bias.

But none of this information reaches us directly; it is always pre-digested for us by the media and by the experts from academic and diplomatic circles who add their own biases and ideological interpretations. The results thus distorted are often responsible for much suffering and a very large number of deaths. Why is this so? Because reality gets lost in the process of transmission. The evidence from the perpetrator governments

and their sympathisers receives credibility; ideological interpretations are accorded more attention than simple facts; and the evidence from the refugees is totally discredited. Thus, any conceivable policy or action is very likely to fail because it is based on deceptions, misinterpretations, lack of accurate information, or downright lies.

An early assessment of the accuracy of victims' testimonies comes from Marie Syrkin (1976). In the fall of 1945, after the end of World War II, she took the first ship from New York that sailed to the Middle East with civilian passengers. Her purpose was to interview survivors of Hitler's death camps and participants in Jewish resistance, the majority of whom then were to be found in the former Palestine. Her results were published in 1947 and reissued thirty years later. During that interval a great deal of documentary evidence became available, as well as much more testimony that had been carefully analyzed and verified by many professionals. However, Syrkin notes in her Introduction to the new edition that these materials support the evidence of the witnesses whom she had interviewed as essentially accurate. She adds that there is little that she would omit, though of course there is much that she could now add. The important point is that these early interviews, with victims soon after their escape, yielded essentially accurate data.

Clay and Holcomb (1986) have illustrated dramatically how the lack of accurate information played a decisive role in the case the Ethiopian famine. While the world was shocked into action by the news of mass starvation, nobody seemed willing to inquire into the causes of the famine. Humanitarian organizations poured in substantial quantities of money and materials without having a sound basis of information. Most of them accepted whatever the government said and they restricted their activities

to those places to which the government gave them access. At the same time they refused to contribute any money at all to research designed to elicit accurate information because they were afraid of how the Ethiopian government might react. (Clay and Holcomb, 1986, see especially chapters I, X, and XI.) Although their humanitarian motives were admirable, their actions were to a very great extent misguided in that they perpetuated the situation that had produced the starvation in the first place. Even their food distribution program was of limited assistance because only a little food reached those who needed it and then only in certain areas, specified by the government.

One of the important indicators that most helping organizations seem to have ignored is the meaning of the starvation that they have tried to alleviate. In the present stage of the world's development the presence of serious starvation in a group is one of the first sure signs that this group has been singled out for victimization. Starvation due to natural causes can now be dealt with by appropriate governmental action. Man-made starvation that is the unintended consequence of dysfunctional social organization or misguided social policies can equally be avoided if appropriate actions are taken as soon as it is recognized. We have available a most instructive demonstration in the crop failures due to lack of rain that hit both Ethiopia and Kenya in the eighties. No serious famine conditions occurred anywhere in Kenya because the government reacted to this emergency by importing food stuffs and distributing them through the established wholesale and retail channels. (Cohen and Lewis, 1986; Jonassohn, 1991) The result is that the media did not even pay attention to the crop failures in Kenya. The Ethiopian famine, on the other hand, received world-wide attention without

a discussion of its man-made origin and without the appropriate action that such a discussion might have prompted. Neither governments nor NGO's seem to have been aware of or drawn the obvious conclusions from the example set by Kenya.

The significant contribution of Clay and Holcomb consists in showing that a great deal of information can be collected in a quite short time at a very modest cost. They were never granted a visa for Ethiopia and therefore had to limit their interviewing to those refugees who had reached the Sudan. They were fully aware of the problems involved in interviewing refugees and of using the information thus obtained. Being denied access to Ethiopia forced them to be very careful with their research design and to pay particular attention to validity and reliability. The results demonstrate, as has earlier research, that refugees are very good sources of information, provided it is collected and analyzed by competent researchers.

Their results, as well as subsequent information, confirm that the famine was a man-made one, that starvation was deliberately used by the government of Mengistu against groups opposed to it, and that the Western assistance programs did very little to change that scenario. Unfortunately it takes more than accurate information to stop or prevent a genocide; but without information any action is likely to be misguided and ineffectual.

What Clay and Holcomb have demonstrated conclusively is that it is possible to obtain very reliable information from refugees, in spite of the traumatic effects of their recent experiences. Whether governments and NGO's are prepared to accept such information and act on it is quite another matter. But in future they will not be able to discount the information obtained from refugees quite so cavalierly.

More recently, Bill Frelick has taken up this same issue in the *World Refugee Survey* (1988) because genocides are becoming more frequent and are responsible for increasing refugee flows. He addresses several significant issues - issues that have to be addressed if there is going to be any hope of international intervention. Even when the news leaks out, there is a need to break through the barriers to disbelief. In order to do so it would be important to produce evidence of intent, which is an essential part of the definition of genocide. The perpetrators only rarely declare their intent as openly as did Hitler in *Mein Kampf* or Hujjatu'l-Islam Qazai, president of the revolutionary court in Shiraz, did when justifying the destruction of Iran's Baha'i community. (The credibility that the world accorded the news of the persecution of the Baha'is contributed greatly to generating support and helped to interrupt the killings.) Therefore, other kinds of evidence of intent need to be examined. Here both the number of refugees and their testimony play a crucial role. Frelick suggests a variety of methods for obtaining this evidence and for establishing its credibility. Though most of these methods are the stock-in-trade of anthropologists and sociologists who engage in field work research, they are frequently ignored by journalists, diplomats, and the representatives of the various aid organizations. These methods include such elementary aspects as establishing the credibility of the interviewer, finding a private setting that excludes peer group pressures, establishing trust, using reliable translators, verifying the accuracy of the translation, and matching the sex of the interviewer with that of the interviewee. While such methods may appear elementary to the social scientist, they are often very difficult to implement in the field. However, they are absolutely crucial if the evidence collected

from refugees is going to be accorded credibility by the world .

Summary

Studying refugee flows, genocides, and famines as isolated, independent phenomena can only lead to erroneous interpretations of results. Treating them as components of a larger process is an essential part of their problematic. It is only a part because it is the essential basis for intervention, but it does not insure that such interventions will in fact take place. For that to happen, international meetings and organizations need to acquire the willingness to act on their various pronouncements on human rights, instead of merely passing resolutions.

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